High sensitivity hexagonal boron nitride lateral neutron detectors

Cite as: Appl. Phys. Lett. 114, 222102 (2019); https://doi.org/10.1063/1.5098331
Submitted: 01 April 2019 . Accepted: 12 May 2019 . Published Online: 04 June 2019

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Lock-in Amplifiers up to 600 MHz
starting at $6,210
High sensitivity hexagonal boron nitride lateral neutron detectors

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Submitted: 1 April 2019 · Accepted: 12 May 2019 ·
Published Online: 4 June 2019

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ABSTRACT
Hexagonal boron nitride (h-BN) thermal neutron detectors have demonstrated the highest detection efficiency among all solid-state detectors (at 58% for a detection area of 1 mm² and 53% for a detection area of 9 mm²). However, scaling up the detector size of vertical h-BN detectors is challenging due to increased dark current, capacitance, and surface recombination with the increasing detection area. Here, we report the demonstration of a 29 mm² thermal neutron detector fabricated from a freestanding 10B-enriched h-BN epilayer of 90 µm in thickness with a detection efficiency of 50% by employing a lateral device geometry. The lateral detector geometry takes advantage of the unique layered structure of h-BN which naturally provides higher in-plane carrier mobilities than those in the vertical direction. Moreover, due to the reduced area of metals in contact with the h-BN material, the detrimental effects associated with the surface recombination at the metal contacts and device capacitance were reduced, which resulted in improved charge collection efficiency and signal to noise ratios. This work laid the groundwork for scaling up to large size neutron detectors based on h-BN.

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Neutron radiation is a signature of the presence of special nuclear materials like plutonium-239 (239Pu). Hence, detectors for sensing neutron radiation are an indispensable tool for detecting any illicit movement of fissile materials at the ports of entry. Neutron detectors are also essential for geothermal and well-logging applications in determining the formation properties of rocks like the water content and porosity. The most technologically mature and widely deployed neutron detectors are pressurized gas detectors filled with helium-3 (3He) which has a high thermal neutron capture cross-section of ~5330 b. However, these detectors are inherently bulky due to long absorption lengths for thermal neutrons in a low atomic density gas filled neutron absorption medium. Other disadvantages of 3He detectors include high biasing voltage (>1000 V), low Q value (~0.764 MeV), high ionization energy of the gas, slow response speed (~ms), high pressurization, and high cost. Therefore, solid-state neutron detectors with high efficiencies and sensitivities with the potential to replace helium-3 gas-filled neutron detectors are an important emerging technology.

Hexagonal boron nitride (h-BN), a wide bandgap (Eg > 6.0 eV) semiconductor, well known for its deep UV applications, has emerged as a highly efficient material for the fabrication of solid-state neutron detectors. The boron-10 (10B) isotope having a large thermal neutron capture cross-section (~3.84 barns) along with a high atomic density (N) in 100% 10B-enriched h-BN (h-10BN) of ~5.5 x 10²²/cm³ provides a large thermal neutron absorption cross section (σ) and hence a short thermal neutron absorption length (l) in h-10BN of ~47.3 µm [σ = a⁻¹ = (Nσ)⁻¹ = (5.5 x 10²² x 3.84 x 10⁻²¹)⁻¹ cm]. Other advantages of h-10BN include higher temperature handling capability, reduced size and weight, no pressurization, and lower operating voltage over those of 3He gas detectors. Furthermore, due to the low atomic numbers of boron and nitrogen atoms, h-10BN has a low sensitivity to gamma radiation.

Vertical h-10BN photoconductive-type thermal neutron detectors consisting of a pair of planar metal contacts deposited on the top and bottom surfaces have demonstrated the highest detection efficiency among all solid-state detectors (at 58% for a detection area of 1 mm² and 53% for a detection area of 9 mm²) and a gamma rejection ratio of better than 10⁵, attributed primarily to the ability for producing thick (~30 µm) films by metal organic chemical vapor deposition (MOCVD). However, neutron flux from a primitive nuclear device is usually low (~3 x 10⁵ neutrons/s), and therefore, large size neutron detectors are desired for practical applications along with high efficiency. There are several technical challenges to scale up the device size while maintaining a high detection efficiency. Increasing the detector size of vertical detectors tends to excessively increase the (a) dark current, (b) capacitance, and (c) surface recombination. Associated with high dark current and capacitance is a decrease in the signal to noise ratio, resulting in low detection efficiency. Surface recombination is another key limiting factor for attaining high charge.
collection efficiency in vertical detectors due to the presence of charge traps located at the metal-BN interface. Previous studies have shown that the surface recombination field increases with the increasing detector size. As a result of these effects combined, the overall detection efficiency in vertical photoconductive-type detectors decreases dramatically with the increasing device size. In this work, we report an alternative approach for fabricating h-10BN detectors in a lateral geometry with the aim of overcoming the challenges involved in the vertical detectors and realization of a 29 mm² detector with a thermal neutron detection efficiency of about 50%.

Epilayers of h-10BN of 90 μm in thickness were grown using MOCVD on 4 in. c-plane sapphire substrates. The detailed growth conditions were discussed previously. The unique layered structure of h-BN coupled with different thermal expansion coefficients between h-BN and the sapphire substrate enables a natural separation of thick h-BN layers from sapphire substrates after growth during cooling down as schematically illustrated in Fig. 1(a). An optical image of a 90 μm thick freestanding h-10BN wafer of 4 in. in diameter is shown in Fig. 1(b). The wafer was then diced for detector fabrication. In this study, we combined two strips with dimensions of 1.2 mm in width and 14 and 10 mm in length to form a photoconductive-type lateral detector with a total device area of 28.8 mm². The strips were mounted on a host sapphire using a highly resistive adhesive material so that the bottom surface of h-10BN faces radiation. A mask of 1 mm in width was used to deposit ohmic contacts consisting of a bilayer of Ni (100 nm)/Au (40 nm) on the clipped edges of the h-10BN strips using e-beam evaporation, leaving around 0.5 μm of metal covering on the edges, as schematically depicted in Fig. 1(c). Optical image of a fabricated h-10BN lateral detector is shown in Fig. 1(d). Photocurrent-voltage characteristics under UV excitation were measured to extract these parameters using Many’s equation.

$$I_i(V) = I_{0i} \eta_i \left[ \frac{V_b + \tau_i}{W l_i} \left( 1 - e^{-\frac{V_b + \tau_i}{W l_i}} \right) \right]$$

where $I_i$ is the saturation current, $\mu_i \tau_i$ ($\mu_e \tau_e$) and $s_i$ ($s_e$) denote the mobility-lifetime product and surface recombination velocity for holes (electrons), respectively, and $V_b$ is the bias voltage applied to the two metal contacts giving an applied electric field of $E_b = V_b / W$, with $W$ being the distance between two electrodes. Equation (1) implies that in order to achieve a high charge collection efficiency, the following two conditions must be satisfied: (a) $\frac{W}{l_i} = \frac{W}{l_s} \ll 1$, which simply states that the charge carrier drift length ($= \mu E_b$) needs to be much larger than the carrier transit distance, $W$, and (b) $\frac{s_i}{\mu_i} = \frac{s_e}{\mu_e} \ll 1$, which means that the external applied electric field must be greater than the surface recombination field, $E_s \gg E_b$, in order to effectively sweep out charge carriers.

Figures 2(a) and 2(b) show the photocurrent vs $V_b$ under UV radiation for both hole and electron transport. A deuterium UV lamp (DS421, Acton Research Corporation) was used as the light source.
covering a spectral range of 190–350 nm. A metal slit was used to selectively illuminate near only one metal contact, as illustrated in Fig. 1(c). If the electrode near the illuminated area is positively (negatively) biased, holes (electrons) travel a much longer distance compared to electrons (holes) before being collected at the electrodes. This scheme enables us to measure the photocurrent for holes or electrons separately, as shown in Figs. 2(a) and 2(b). By fitting the photocurrent-voltage characteristics with Eq. (1), values of υ/μ and s/μ were extracted to be υh/μh = 4.1 × 10^3 cm/Vs, μhτh = 8.0 × 10^4 cm^2/Vs, s/μh = 6.2 × 10^4 V/cm, and s/μe = 1.6 × 10^7 V/cm. The results imply that our lateral h-10BN detector has a value of υh/s ≈ μh/s ≤ 0.06 at a bias voltage of Vb = 550 V for both electron and hole transports, well satisfying the condition for a high charge collection efficiency. The measured values for υh/s ≈ 1.35 and s/μe ≈ 0.35 at a bias voltage of 550 V, which are short from the ideal conditions for a high charge collection efficiency. These values together provide a total charge collection efficiency for electrons (holes) of 72.9% (41.2%) at a bias voltage of 550 V. In comparison, vertical detectors of a similar size exhibit a typical charge collection efficiency below 30% under the same electric field. Nevertheless, the results clearly show that it is the surface recombination which limits the charge collection efficiency in lateral h-10BN detectors.

Pulse height spectra of the lateral h-10BN detector were measured at different bias voltages (Vb) under thermal neutron radiation from a 252Cf source with a radioactivity of 0.50 mCi (~2.14 × 10^10 n/s) moderated by a high-density polyethylene (HDPE) block of 2.5 cm in thickness.6–9 Pulse height spectra were first recorded for 15 min in the absence of any source where the highest channel of this dark spectrum recorded for each Vb acted as a low-level discriminator (LLD). Then, the detector was exposed to thermal neutrons at 60 cm away from the HDPE moderated 252Cf source under the same Vb for 15 min to obtain the pulse height spectra, as shown in Fig. 3. The total number of neutron counts was obtained by integrating the pulse height spectrum beyond the LLD. By comparing the counts from a 6LiF filled microstructured semiconductor neutron detector (MSND Domino V4) with a thermal neutron detection efficiency of 30 (%±1)% and a device area of 4 cm^2, the detection efficiency (η) of our h-10BN lateral detector was determined to be 49.5 (%±2.2)% at a bias voltage of 550 V. In terms of the detection sensitivity, Cb ∝ ηA, this lateral detector outperforms the previous state-of-the-art 9 mm^2 vertical detectors by a factor of about 3 [(50% × 9 mm^2)/(53% × 9 mm^2)].

Neutrons are not only incident randomly on the c-plane between two electrodes of the h-10BN detector, but they are also absorbed randomly deeper inside the detector due to a longer absorption length of λ ~ 47.3 μm for thermal neutrons than for the above bandgap photons of ~13 nm in h-10BN. Moreover, in contrast to photocurrent, neutrons are detected one at a time. Therefore, the charge collection efficiency (ηc) under neutron excitation may not be identical to those measured under UV photon excitation. Figure 4 plots ηc vs Vb for the lateral h-10BN detector under thermal neutron irradiation, where ηc accounts for the discrepancy between the measured thermal neutron detection efficiency (η) and the theoretical detection efficiency, p(t) = 1 − e^−t = 85% for a detector with a thickness of t = 90 μm, and can be calculated from the ratio of η/p. The results shown in Fig. 4 indicate that this device requires at least 100 V to have any sensitivity to neutrons. This could be due to a potential drop at the semiconductor-metal junction. Moreover, ηc starts to saturate at Vb ~ 400 V and approaches a value of 58.2 (%±2.6)% at 550 V.

Although the charge collection efficiencies of h-10BN lateral neutron detectors are still primarily limited by the surface effects, they are significantly improved over those in vertical detectors with the same detection area. However, compared to a vertical detector of the same detection area consisting of a pair of planar metal contacts deposited on the top and bottom surfaces,7–9 lateral detectors possess several other advantageous features as presented in Table 1. The lateral or in-plane mobility (μjj) of charge carriers is estimated to be ~100 times greater than that in the vertical direction, μJJ. High carrier mobility is

![FIG. 3. Nuclear reaction pulse height spectrum of the 28.8 mm^2 lateral h-10BN detector under thermal neutron radiation. The neutron response was measured by placing the detector 60 cm away from the 252Cf source moderated by a 1 in. thick high-density polyethylene (HDPE) moderator for 15 min. To determine the “dark” counts or electronic noise level at this distance, another measurement was conducted for 15 min at the same bias voltage in the absence of any source (blue curve).](image)

![FIG. 4. Bias voltage dependence of the charge collection efficiency of a 28.8 mm^2 lateral h-10BN detector under thermal neutron irradiation.](image)
expected to benefit the charge collection efficiency. The resistivity of lateral devices is ~100 times lower than that of vertical devices. However, the separation distance between the electrodes is farther apart in the lateral detector (detector width, W) compared to that in the vertical detector (detector thickness, t), providing a larger resistance, R. Moreover, while the cross-section area for neutron radiation along the c-axis of h-BN is the same, the cross-section area for charge carrier collection (or the contact area) in a lateral detector shown schematically in Fig. 1(c) is significantly reduced, providing a reduced capacitance, C. This is the reason why the measured dark current (I_d) for the lateral detector investigated here was ~0.1 pA at a bias voltage V_b > 500 V, which is considerably lower than that in the vertical h-BN detector of the same size, whereas the C and the RC time constant of the lateral detector are about two orders of magnitude smaller than those of the vertical detector. The reductions in I_d and C significantly improve the detection efficiency since the electronic noise (or LLD) decreases linearly with decreasing I_d and quadratically with decreasing C. Also, the number of surface traps in a lateral detector is lower at the metal-BN interface due to the reduced area of metals in contact with h-BN. Hence, the surface effects are reduced, which in turn would enhance the charge collection efficiency in lateral detectors. These combined advantages enabled us to increase the detector size while maintaining a high detection efficiency of 50% in lateral detectors. Furthermore, in terms of fabrication processes, lateral detectors require only one-time metal deposition compared to two times for vertical detectors, reducing the processing steps and thereby potentially increasing the device yield.

In summary, we have fabricated a lateral h-BN detector with a device size of 29 mm² with a detection efficiency of about 50%. Our work showed that it is easier to fabricate and scale up the size of detectors in a lateral geometry compared to vertical geometry. This is due to unique features of the layered structure of h-BN as well as decreased capacitance and surface recombination effects in lateral devices. However, improvements in metal contact fabrication and surface treatment processes are needed to minimize the surface effects. This work laid the foundation for the development of larger area h-BN detectors with high efficiency and sensitivity.

This research is supported by DOE ARPA-E (No. DE-AR0000964). The NNSA SSAA program (No. DE-NA0002927) supported the initial efforts of detector fabrication. Jiang and Lin are grateful to the AT&T Foundation for the support of Ed Whitacre and Linda Whitacre endowed chairs.

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